

Good Sense Outweighed Politics in Water Accord

Plan will meet needs of families, farmers, fish

By Elliot Diringer
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Sooner or later, someone was going to make the allusion, and when just the right moment presented itself, Governor Wilson could not resist.

Declaring yesterday to a roomful of reporters that "peace has broken out amid the water wars," the governor then turned to once-and-future combatants, invited them to sign their historic cease-fire, and quipped, "We're lacking only Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin."

Indeed, although California's travails hardly rival those of the Middle East, the sweeping last-minute accord committing new water to the resuscitation of San Francisco Bay may well prove the most profound step ever toward ending California's long-running water wars.

It secures more water for imperiled fish in the bay and the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. It assures farmers and cities a more predictable, if somewhat diminished, supply. And it sets the stage for new talks aimed at a lasting solution to the "delta dilemma."

"Quite simply, we have a plan that meets the needs of the families, the farmers and the fish," declared Environmental Protection Agency chief Carol Browner, who flew out from Washington with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to join in the signing.

"What we have here today," she said, "is a triumph of common sense over politics as usual."

The delta, though a place visited by few Californians, is vital to both the state's economy and its environment because it is the state's largest source of water.

A patchwork of islands and levees 50 miles east of San Francisco where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers converge, the delta captures nearly half the state's total runoff. It supplies farms up and down the Central Valley, and provides some or all of the drinking water for two of every three Californians, from the Bay Area to Los Angeles.

For a quarter-century, since the state's huge delta pumps were switched on and the fish began to

steadily decline, environmentalists have been fighting to recapture some of the water diverted by cities and farms and return it to the bay and delta.

The agreement signed yesterday is, in fact, the latest in a series of measures reallocating California's water back to its original users — fish and other inhabitants of the state's beleaguered rivers, bays and wetlands.

But unlike other recent moves — Congress' overhaul two years ago of the Central Valley Project, and a recent ruling earlier this year protecting Mono Lake — the bay-delta accord is a creature of consensus.

Faced with a court deadline, and the threat of federal intervention, the three sides — urban, farm, and environmental interests — finally rolled up their sleeves and started bargaining in earnest.

The marathon negotiations began months ago and ended late Wednesday in a seven-page agreement that thrilled no one but all could live with.

Although the agreement sets out the basic framework, it falls to the state Water Resources Control Board to decide who ultimately will have to give up how much water to the bay and delta, a process that will begin next year.

And it envisions that during the next three years, the parties will keep negotiating and perhaps strike agreement on a lasting solution — a way to reconfigure plumbing in the delta so more water can be captured for everyone.

"We don't pretend this agreement is the final answer," said Governor Wilson. "There will undoubtedly be some rough sledding ahead."

But for at least a brief moment yesterday, state, federal and private interests more accustomed to treating one another as adversaries celebrated a virtual love-fest, taking turns crediting one and all for their fine achievement.

There were, of course, detractors.

WATER ACCORD HIGHLIGHTS

- Centers on water quality standards for the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. More fresh water will be allowed to flow through the delta, holding down salt water intrusion.

- Provides more reliable supplies for cities and farms, even though they will get somewhat less water. If more water is needed for newly endangered species, it would be purchased by the federal government from water users willing to sell.

- Means federal and state officials will jointly make environmental decisions in the delta, with the overall ecology in mind.

- Provides for closer coordination of the federal and state waterworks that divert water from the delta.

- Calls for greater environmental protections, such as installation of fish screens on water diversion pipes along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, without increasing the costs of water.

— Associated Press

Senator Tom Hayden, who has just taken over as chairman of the Natural Resources and Wildlife Committee, said he planned hearings on the "environmental adequacy" of the agreement.

"I cannot support a compromise that puts salmon at the risk of extinction," said Hayden, "while we waste water and recklessly overdevelop Southern California."